

Ready to Celebrate/Canada Day



The weather alternated between gorgeous and wet on Canada Day, but the thousands who filled up Fort George Park came prepared for the occasion. ROB BIRON/FREE PRESS

Take care of your teeth

Each week, this column is dedicated to presenting you with enriching and enlightening information that will better your life in uncountable ways. This week, I pass along the most valuable and sensible piece of advice I ever received. Get ready! Here it comes:

Take care of your teeth, you idiot!

This piece of eternal wisdom was passed on to me by my Dad, whose teeth started popping out of his mouth when he was in his 40s, which, let's face it, is way too early for your teeth to be popping out of your mouth.

Dad had never taken particularly good care of his teeth, so he became a pretty convincing argument for good dental hygiene. He became "Gummy the Dad."

Gummy was especially fond of hauling out his dentures and waving them at you to emphasize his point. Then he would pop his teeth back in and light up another cigarette. Fortunately, Dad never had to get a lung transplant, or I'm sure he would have been waving a specimen bottle full of cancerous lungs at us. Come to think of it, that might have been helpful, too.

But the fatherly denture demonstration did its job, and I have taken relatively decent care of my teeth ever since. I brush and floss regularly, and I have my teeth cleaned by an official dental person (Karen) at least once a year. Despite these efforts, my teeth are still in grave peril.

The problem is that your comprehensive dental care usually involves your dentist. And your dentist hates you, because he has to stick his hands in your mouth, which is easily the most disgusting job in the world. And you probably didn't even have the common courtesy to brush before



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you showed up late for your appointment. So your dentist, even if you have the most pristine set of chompers this side of Christie Brinkley, will recommend that he remove your lower jaw and replace it with the grillwork from a '72 Ford Fairlane.

In junior high, on the advice of my dentist, I was fitted with a set of orthodontic appliances (fridge, stove, washer, dryer), which were welded to my teeth for a period of three years. When the appliances were removed and sold for scrap, I had a spectacular set of perfectly straight teeth which I was free to admire in the mirror at my leisure, without the annoying distraction of a social life.

I assumed I would not be inflicted with any more radical dentistry before the age of, say, 90.

Of course, I was horribly mistaken.

I couldn't afford to see a dentist for about five years after my appliances were removed, and when I finally did, I received some bad news. I had walked into one of those storefront dentist locations, where the janitor is allowed to masquerade as a fully qualified dentist. After I was examined and irradiated, I was told that I had a troublesome wisdom tooth, which would have to be "extracted."

Beware these words: "Can I do it, Dave? I've never done an extraction."

At one point, this strange little foreign woman, who had apparently learned her extraction techniques at an autobody shop, was kneeling on my chest and yanking on my tooth with an instrument that looked like a whaling harpoon.

After some 90 minutes in dental hell, I was handed some cotton wads and encouraged to leave before I could bleed on the other "patients."

Following a short recuperative period of several years, I went to another dentist. I had big, healthy teeth, he said. And then he suggested removing the other three remaining wisdom teeth before they stabbed through my gums and penetrated my brain.

He smiled the whole time. He had great teeth. And a clearly visible diploma.

Actually, this extraction experience was considerably shorter and less traumatic than the previous one, even with additional wisdom teeth being involved. I was also given a larger supply of cotton wads. And a larger prescription for painkillers. They all came in very handy.

Surely, my teeth had finally learned their lesson.

But no, upon my last annual visit to the ceremonial stainless steel spittoon, I was informed that my teeth were still big and healthy, but my gums were collapsing like a Bosnian ceasefire. My teeth were clenching far too much (in an obvious attempt to prevent further dental treatment), and it was damaging my gums. I would have to wear a boxing-style mouthguard at night, until my teeth smartened up.

My teeth didn't get the message, so the campaign of terror was stepped up. A new, hard plastic appliance - resembling a medieval torture device - was created, with brutal wire clamps on the sides and the same basic comfort level as a mouthful of plastic picnic utensils.

If anything, my teeth are clamped tighter than ever. And who can blame them?

Frankly, if you want to take proper care of your teeth, be my guest. You can just call me Gummy.

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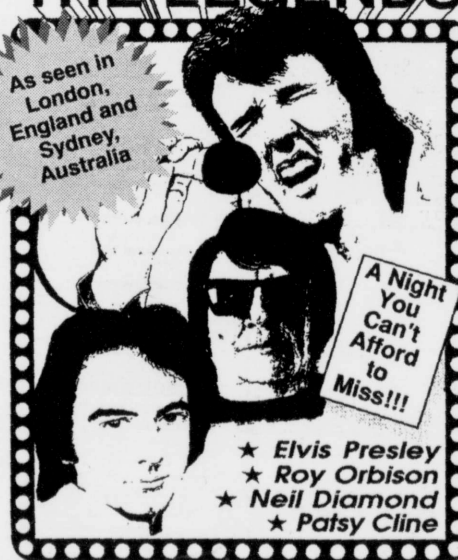
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